



The Present by **UnderratedHero**

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Summary: It's Eleven's first Christmas, and Mike is resolved to make it the best one ever for her as he struggles to find the perfect present and deals with some concerns about their feelings for each other.
[Mileven]

The Present

Hey guys. This is my first time writing for Stranger Things. I watched this show for the first time when Season 2 came out. I binged both seasons and I'm in love with this. I knew that sooner or later I would be writing fanfics for it. This one is just a little Christmas thing I decided to write.

It would have been posted in Christmas, but for some reason FF gave me "server issues" for two days and I couldn't upload the file to the site! So sorry it's coming late.

I've got to say that it's a very personal story (like, centered in the characters and their feelings) and there's not a big plot, like I always try to have, but like I said, it's my first time writing these characters, and I wanted to start training on how to use them. I'll probably write more with them in the future.

This is my little late-Christmas gift for you guys. I hope you like it and it doesn't end up feeling like you just received a bag full of coal.

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The Present.

"MIKE! WILL!" Screamed Lucas, as loud as his lungs allowed him to.

"RUN!"

Dustin's cry echoed in the woods, but there was no one there to listen to him, no one there to save his friends. Mike and Will were running like their lives depended on it –which they certainly did–, trying to find a tree to take cover. They didn't dare to look back; they knew that if they slowed down even a bit, they would be doomed. They could see Dustin and Lucas hiding behind an old tree that had fallen during the latest storm. It wasn't the best hiding place, but it would provide them coverage and they could use it to buy time. They were

so close, only a few more yards and they would be safe with their friends...

Luck had never been kind with poor Will, though, and in a moment of distraction, his left foot hit a root on the ground, causing him to trip and fall face-first into the snow.

"WILL!" Dustin's painful cry alerted Mike. He stopped dead in his tracks and turned around. His best friend was laying on the ground, wiping the snow out of his hair.

The Wheeler boy had an adrenaline rush. He could feel his agitated breath and his heart pounding in his chest. He looked up, and sweat started to run down his forehead when he saw *them* getting closer. Dustin and Lucas were still yelling, screaming both their names, but all he could focus on was Will's terrified face on the ground.

He knew it was dangerous, but he couldn't leave a member of his party behind.

"What are you doing?! Save yourself!" Will told him when he saw Mike going back to him to help him stand up.

"I'm not losing you again, Will!" He said, doing his best to lift his friend. He wasn't the strongest guy in Hawkins Middle School, but Will was fairly light weighted, so he managed to get him to stand up pretty quick. The young Byers, meanwhile, looked at his friend with great admiration. Mike Wheeler would never leave a friend behind. He would go to the literal gates of Hell if that's what it took to save his friends. He knew that he was risking too much, but he couldn't help but be glad at him.

Unfortunately for them, their chasers hadn't slowed down even a bit.

"This is it, boys."

The menacing voice startled them. Mike immediately took a step forward, standing protectively in front of Will. He looked at them straight in the eye, trying to look much braver than he actually felt. They were trapped. They were in a clear in the middle of the forest, there was nowhere to hide, no way to avoid what was coming. They

were at point-blank range. He wondered how much it would hurt.

"Any last words?"

He gulped down, staring at his executioner's eyes, which were glowing with excitement. He certainly couldn't overpower them, not even with Will's help.

But he could outsmart them.

"Don't you think that this is the end," he began, using his Dungeon Master voice, dragging the words and creating a solemn atmosphere, "for our death will be nothing but the beginning of your fall. You may end us now, but you will never win because what you have in ferocity, you lack in—"

"Jesus, Wheeler, I meant a few words, not a Bible," said one of their chasers, looking annoyed.

"What's 'Bible'?"

"It's a book... well, a collection of books and they talk about God and Jesus, basically" he explained with a calm tone and a tender smile; a smile that suddenly twisted into a smug, evil grin. "But you can also call it... misdirection!"

The timing was perfect. During his little speech, Dustin and Lucas had moved from their hiding place, preparing an ambush. At his signal, both of them let out their war cries and threw their snowballs at the two girls.

Max let out a loud shriek of surprise, ducking to avoid Lucas's shot. Eleven simply moved his head to the side, and Dustin's projectile stopped in midair.

"Let's go!" Mike told Will, and taking advantage of their chasers distraction, they ran behind a tree to catch their breath and prepare some more snowballs to toss.

It was the afternoon of December 23th, and the whole gang was spending it playing snowball wars in the forest near Hopper's cabin. Eleven still wasn't allowed to go to Hawkings, because not even two

months had passed since the incident at the lab and they couldn't take any chances with her. At first, it had been really disappointing for the poor girl. Once she had finally met her friends again, she thought she could go back to Mike's house and they could all hang out there, but she was still confined to that cabin in the middle of the woods. Even worse, Hopper didn't want anyone to get suspicious of anything, so the boys were only allowed to see her twice a week.

The last time they had been there, right before Hopper got home, Mike had told her all about snowball fights, and how fun they were. At first, she didn't understand. She went to the Snow Ball with Mike, and there was no fighting there, but then he explained the difference. It still sounded bad at first, with all the fighting and the fact that it involved throwing things at her friends, but he convinced her that it was going to be fun. She agreed to try it, and so the next time the whole party went to Hopper's cabin to play a magnificent snowball war. She started teaming up with Will and Dustin, so they were three versus three. But the moment Eleven started tossing snowballs with her mind, they decided it would be fairer to have the girls against the boys. Max had a wicked right arm, so it was fairly balanced.

She was having the time of her life. Dustin kept throwing snowballs at her, but she ran, ducked and dodged them, occasionally using her powers to avoid getting hit. She liked using her hands to make and throw her own snowballs, but she also cheated every once in a while to dodge one or to attack him faster. Dustin kept yelling obscenities every time he was hit, and she loved it. After hitting him in the shoulder, she stopped for a second and turned around. Where was Mike? She couldn't see him.

She was soon punished for her distraction, as Dustin hit her right in the head. It hurt her a little, and she slowly turned around, glaring at him.

"Oh shit, El, I'm sorry, I swear to God I was aiming for your back," he said, with a look of pure terror on his face.

He saw a little trail of blood coming down from her nostril, and about a dozen big sized snowballs raised from the ground around her.

"Son of a bitch!" He cursed before running away from her.

Meanwhile, Mike and Will were a little behind, watching with interest how Lucas and Max exchanged hits while Eleven buried Dustin in a mountain of snow, hitting him so hard his ancestors would feel the pain.

"She's like a machine gun," Will pointed out.

"Yeah. It's kind of scary," Mike admitted.

"You should go help him out."

"Me? What about you?"

"I'll go with Lucas. He needs some help, too."

"I'm not gonna land a single snowball on her, she's gonna kick my ass," he said with a smile, not really worried about it.

"You don't need to hit her with a snowball," said Will with a smile. "Remember the Lich in your last campaign?"

Mike looked at him with interest. Understanding soon dawned on him, and he also grinned.

"His spells were too powerful, you couldn't win in a ranged combat," he remembered. He patted his friend on the back. "You honor your name, Will the Wise."

Will laughed at that, made a snowball for himself, and charged right against Mad Max. Mike also stood up and sprinted towards El, who was too busy making Dustin's life miserable with all her projectiles to even notice that he was coming from behind. Only when he was ten yards away from her she heard him. She turned around and a big smile spread on her face. Mike stopped and smiled at her too.

"Your reign of terror ends today, Eleven," he solemnly stated. "Surrender now."

Still smiling at him, she shook her head.

"I'm a fighter," she told him, making a snowball with her hands and aiming at him.

"So be it!" He said, before charging against her.

Eleven giggled and threw him her snowball, but he ducked it and kept running towards her. The girl tried to escape away from him, and she used her powers to keep throwing snowballs at Mike. Most of them hit him, but he simply covered his face and continued his unstoppable march, quickly catching up to her.

"You're mine now!" He said when he was finally able to reach her and grab her left wrist.

She squealed and laughed as she tried to free herself, still throwing snow at him with her mind. He shrugged off the impacts, and after a few seconds, he managed to wrap his arms around her, trying to lift her up from the ground, which caused her to laugh louder. She was even lighter than Will, but she was also struggling to escape him, and so he lost his balance, falling onto the snow with her on top of him.

She turned around so she could look at him in the face. She wasn't struggling anymore, but he still left his arms around her waist. They smiled at each other. He saw the little trail of blood coming down her nostril, and he gently wiped it away with his thumb, leaving his hand tenderly stroking her cheek and making her blush.

"I think this means I win," he said with a goofy smile.

"You cheated," she said. "This was snowball fight. You didn't use snowball."

"Yeah, well, I had to use other tactics. Sorry El, I know it sucks to lose, but this time I win."

She chuckled and then remained in silence as she looked at him straight in the eye. Their faces were so close... It reminded her of when they were dancing on the Snow Ball just a week ago, and of the kiss they'd shared. She bit her lower lip.

"Losing's not so bad," she finally told him, her eyes glowing with excitement and something else as they moved from his eyes to his lips in quick succession.

He gulped and nodded slightly. He had her there, just a few inches

away from him, and she looked so... pretty. Like she always did. He still couldn't believe how lucky he was to be able to be there with her, to play with her, to teach her stuff, to talk with her, to just stay in silence as they both got lost in each other's eyes. He was about to tilt his head and lean forward when a snowball hit him hard on the side of his face, startling both him and Eleven.

"Ouch! What the hell?" He said, sitting up along with El and looking at his right.

"Oh, sorry, I thought we were playing a snowball fight, not making snow angels in pairs," Max said with a mischievous smile.

Lucas, Dustin, and Will were all standing beside her, looking at their two friends. As much as they enjoyed teasing them, watching them together brought genuine smiles to their faces. Mike was their friend, and they loved him. They never ever complained about how his behavior had changed for the past year, they just tried to do their best to be there for him and help him whenever they could. After several months of dealing with Angry Mike, seeing him smiling with glowing eyes once again was a sight to be thankful for. They didn't only get Eleven back into their lives; they also got Mike back.

"Snow angel?" Eleven asked after considering Max's words. She looked at her friend—they had become friends fairly quickly after El was reassured that there was nothing going on between the other girl and Mike—, but her eyes soon moved over to Mike's. He was, after all, the best one explaining things to her.

"Oh, that's just something you do on the snow," he explained to her, getting up and lending her a hand. "You lay down and start moving your arms and legs. When you're done, it looks like a person with wings and stuff. Like an angel. You know what an angel is, right?"

She accepted his hand and stood up as she frowned and pursed her lips, thinking hard.

"Yes," she said after a brief pause, remembering some of the Christmas decorations Hopper had brought to their home. "Snow angels... Are they pretty?"

Mike looked at the rest of his friends. They were all smiling. It was kind of cute whenever Eleven asked for something. She was adorably innocent, and the curiosity and excitement in her words always cheered them up.

"I think the snowball fight is officially over," said Lucas, shrugging off his shoulders, "we might as well teach Eleven about snow angels now."

She smiled at her friends, and soon they all laid down on the ground. She saw them moving their arms and legs in circles, and she laughed at how silly and funny they looked. Mike looked especially stupid, his arms stiff as boards and moving without any type of grace. She stood above him, watching him intently. For so long, she had wanted nothing more than to see him again. Not by using her powers, traveling to the void and watching a mirage of him, no; she wanted to be close to him, to appreciate all his features, to be able to touch him. After almost a year, her dream had come true.

He loved all her friends, she really did, but there was something that made Mike stand out from the rest. She didn't know what it was, she didn't know why, but there was something that made him different.

"Here, El, take a look!"

She turned around and looked at Will. He was smiling at her, pointing a finger at the figure he made on the snow. Unlike the rest, Will made sure that his legs would touch, and it the final result looked more like a robe. Eleven has happy to see that she could make out the shape of an angel if she used her imagination a bit.

"It looks good," she told Will with a smile.

"You can even add a halo to it so it looks even better", he said, kneeling down and tracing an oval over the angel's head with his finger.

"No one does that," Dustin said, sitting up and staring at Will with squinted eyes. "Don't listen to him, Eleven, he doesn't know what he's talking about."

"I mean, it's a nice detail," said Max.

Dustin turned his head to stare at her.

"Seriously? Are you going to approve that behavior? Even though it goes against everything we've learned from the long tradition of snow angel-ing?" He asked, like what they were suggesting was the worst type of heresy.

"I think you're overreacting," Lucas told him, raising an eyebrow.

Dustin looked stunned. He shook his head and mouthed a silent "wow".

"I literally can't believe you, guys. This is snow angels we're talking about, it's not something you can change or reinterpret. It has a defined shape and it's been done in that same way for decades, maybe centuries. Adding something to it is like changing the lyrics of the national anthem just because you think it'd be cooler."

As Dustin, Lucas and Max began a very heated debate about the nature of snow angels and whether it was okay or not to change traditions, Eleven looked at them without understanding. She understood the general idea behind their disagreement, but she didn't know what they were arguing about. It didn't seem too important.

"Just ignore them."

Mike had stood up and was now beside her and Will, looking at her with a shy smile.

"It's just a banter, they're not really fighting."

She frowned.

"Banter?"

"It means that they're pretending that they're mad at each other," Will explained her. "They're having fun."

It didn't make much sense to her, but she nodded all the same. Will seemed to notice that she wasn't really understanding.

"Hey, why don't you try making your own snow angel?" He suggested.

Eleven really wanted to try it. She quickly laid on the snow, extended her arms and legs, and started moving them like her friends did. It was somewhat fun doing it, feeling her arms dragging the snow whenever they moved. Even if it wasn't as fun as snowball fights, she loved it. After being a prisoner her whole life in one way or another, hanging out with friends and doing silly stuff felt incredible. It was the best feeling ever.

Mike saw the smile on her face, and he smiled too. He knew what she was thinking, and he was so happy for her. It was the same feeling he had whenever he saw Will having fun with them. Both of them went through a lot, and they deserved to be happy, to play without any type of worries, to have fun. To have a normal life. He was glad that Eleven could play with them.

"That looks really good, El," said Will as soon as she finished her snow angel and stood up to admire her work.

"Thank you," she told him, and then her eyes moved towards Mike with a dreamy look.

"Yeah, it looks great," he quickly added.

She smiled and looked back at her angel. He saw her looking at it for a few seconds before she knelt down and added a halo. Her winter clothes looked adorable on her, and he found himself staring at every little snowflake on her curly hair. He loved her new look. Those curls really accentuated her soft features, her beautiful eyes, the subtle smile on her face... She was definitely the cutest girl he had ever met.

"A pretty angel," he concluded out loud, without thinking. He only realized what he had said when both Eleven and Will turned to look at him. He felt his cheeks getting warm as he furiously blushed. "I-I MEAN, it's definitely a pretty angel! Good job, El!"

She looked delighted by his words, while Will tried his very best to stop himself from laughing at his friend's obvious slip-up and

embarrassed face. Mike looked at him with pleading eyes that had "Please don't tell Dustin and Lucas" written all over them. Will just nodded in silence to assure him that his secret was safe.

Mike sighed, glad that at least he had said the most embarrassing thing ever in front of the only friend that wouldn't make his life miserable because of it.

"Alright guys, I should probably head home now," said Max, taking the last sip of hot chocolate before putting down her mug.

After several hours of playing outside, sunset was kicking in and they were tired. The group of friends went inside Hopper's cabin, where they treated themselves with six mugs of hot chocolate. The orange sky painted the inside of the cabin in wonderful colors, and they were all pretty relaxed, barely talking with each other, mostly just dwelling in the comfyness of the place.

"Really? Can't you stay a little longer?" Asked a somewhat disappointed Lucas.

"No, I need to go home and get all my stuff packed," she grimly said, standing up and going to grab her coat.

The rest of the kids exchanged a worried look. Max was spending Christmas in another town, visiting some relatives. She had explained to them how much she hated those reunions. Something about "people acting like they really care and love each other when they don't really give a shit about anyone else in the room". They wished they could do something to help her, but even though they were able to save the world from The Mind Flayer, they couldn't save their friend from her family.

It sucked, but there was nothing they could do. Lucas shook his head for a second and then stood up.

"Hey, Max, uh, do you, like, want me to give you a ride on my bike?" He asked, struggling to find a cool way to stand. He failed miserably, with his arms going from a jar position to cross over his chest, to one of them hanging limp at his side with the other hand inside a pocket.

She snickered.

"Don't get mushy on me, stalker," she warned him, pointing an accusing finger towards him. She grabbed her stuff and walked to the door. "Thanks for the chocolate, El. And I guess I'll see you in a couple of days, so Merry Christmas guys."

"Merry Christmas," they all said.

Waving her hand, Max removed the locks, opened the door and then exited the cabin, leaving the original party and Eleven alone. Lucas stood there for almost a minute after she left, looking at the door like he wanted nothing more than to just run and go with her. He decided to go against that thought and instead went back to sit on the table next to his friends. For a few seconds, no one said anything. He looked too bummed out.

"You okay?" Will finally asked.

Lucas curled his lip, his eyes fixed on the very interesting table in front of him.

"I don't know. I just... I don't think it's fair. We're all gonna have a Christmas Eve's dinner tomorrow at Mike's, and we'll be together, happy with our families and stuff. She should be there with us."

"I would totally approve Max being there with us, I would, honestly," began Dustin, "but I really don't want to be close to her psychopath stepbrother ever again. That dude's crazier than Jhonny Lawrence, and we don't have Mr. Miyagi here to teach us how to defend ourselves against him."

"That's exactly why she should be with us," Lucas snapped back, so fiercely that it made some of them jump in their seat. "You should spend Christmas with people you love, not with... people like him."

He was right, of course, and they all agreed with him. Max didn't deserve to spend time with her awful stepbrother. They didn't know what his problem was, they only knew that he had tried to kill them once with his car and that he almost killed Steve the night the gate was closed. They certainly didn't like him one bit. The whole

conversation practically killed the comfy mood, and no one knew what to say to lighten it up back again. So, of course, it was up to Dustin to say something stupid.

"Don't pretend you have altruistic motives, Sinclair. We all know you just wanted to make her stand under the mistletoe with you."

Will and Mike laughed at his words, while Lucas confidently said he didn't need mistletoe to do that. Dustin made a sarcastic comment about his masculinity, and before anyone knew what was going on, both guys were wrestling on the floor, trying to subdue the other one. Mike and Will were laughing even harder now, focused on the fight before them and taking bets on who would win.

A tug on his shirt cut Mike's attention. He looked to his right and found Eleven looking at him.

"Mike?" She asked in a soft voice.

"Yeah?"

"What did he mean by that?" She said, looking at Dustin. "About... mistletoe."

Mike shot a desperate look at Will.

"I'll wash the mugs so Hopper doesn't kill us when he gets home," he quickly said, completely ignoring his best friend's silent plead.

The Wheeler boy glared at him, before sighing. Well, it wasn't *that* bad, he could answer her question without making it awkward.

"Mistletoe is a plant, El," he began explaining. "It's something people use sometimes to decorate their houses for Christmas. It's really pretty, and it has green and red, which are usually the colors of the holiday."

Eleven nodded in silence, but she kept staring at him, waiting for something that would explain Dustin's remark. Mike realized there was no way around the subject, so he tried to ignore the growing blush he knew he was showing on his face.

"And, well, there's a tradition that says that... Um... If two people stand under mistletoe, they, uh, they have to kiss."

"Kiss," she repeated, a tiny smile appearing on her face. Mike lost himself in her eyes. They looked so beautiful, so pure.

"Yes. Kiss. So Dustin was teasing Lucas. He says Lucas only wanted to kiss Max, and he needed an excuse."

"Do you need excuses? To kiss?" She asked him.

"S-Sometimes. Sometimes you can't kiss someone out of the blue, it... it might be rude, or make people uncomfortable, so you usually shouldn't do that" he said, and he was painfully aware that they were both thinking about the same incident over a year ago at the school cafeteria.

Will didn't lie, he was actually washing the mugs on the sink. His eyes were definitely fixed on the task at hand, but his attention was focused on the conversation happening a few feet away from him. He was smiling as he heard everything Mike told Eleven, and he was glad that they could share such moments.

Unknown to Lucas and Dustin, Mike had relied on Will to share his feelings during that year where Eleven was missing. He didn't want to worry the other guy, but he felt it was safe to talk with Will. And the Zombie Boy had been more than willing to be there for his friend. How could he not? For what he had heard, Mike was the one that never gave up on him, the one that insisted on ignoring Hopper's warnings and go out there looking for him. He owed him his life. Whenever Mike needed someone to vent off, he would be there for him. And he had needed someone pretty bad.

Mike had some major breakdowns several times throughout the year. Sometimes he just called him at night. Sometimes he biked all the way to his house. Sometimes they were just hanging out when it suddenly hit him. And every single time, he cried like Will had never seen him do. It wasn't a simple weeping, it was the howl of a boy with a broken heart. It absolutely terrified Will. What could he say to ease his pain? What could he do? He wasn't crying because his baseball team had lost the World Series. The source of his pain was

bigger than that. He cried because he missed *her*. He cried because he never got the chance to tell her that he liked her. He cried because he felt it was his fault, that he should've protected her from the Bad Men. He cried because he didn't have any pictures of her. He cried because she had saved him and he couldn't return the favor. He even cried because he was tired of feeling like shit, and he felt guilty because a small part of him told him that he should move on, but he didn't want to move on. He didn't want to forget her.

The pain Mike felt was incomparable. It always made Will miserable, because there was nothing he could do to help his friend. But now Eleven was back, and Mike was once again the happiest kid on Earth.

And he was just staring at the girl sitting next to him, oblivious to Will's side glances and the Full Nelson Lucas was applying to Dustin on the floor not even five feet away from him. The world was reduced to himself, Eleven, and the twelve inches between them. Nothing else mattered. He saw her eyebrows furrowing and his lips trembling for a second, the unmistakable signs that she had a question. He patiently waited for her.

"Sometimes..." She slowly said, focusing on getting every syllable right. "Sometimes, you need excuses."

"Yes."

"That means sometimes, you don't," she finished, and the way she ended the sentence let him know that there was a question inside that statement.

"Yeah, that is, uh, that is correct", he agreed.

Apparently, she wasn't completely satisfied with his answer, for her eyes were staring directly into his soul, intense like the eyes of a panther. If he was her prey, he just knew that he was already doomed.

"I mean, as a general rule, you shouldn't kiss someone without an excuse," he continued. "Especially if you're not too close to them. But... but sometimes it's okay to do it if you know that the other person is okay with it. Or if you know that you both want it. And..."

And there are times when you just... When you really, really want to kiss them, and you just don't care about anything else. And when you're feeling like that... sometimes you just do it."

A Demogorgon could have burst into the cabin with a legion of Demodogs behind it, and Mike would have hardly flinched. All he could think of was about how much he wanted to kiss her, with or without excuses. He didn't care if his friends saw him. Heck, he didn't even remember that they were there! As his eyes moved to her lips and his head leaned forward, all he could think of was that he wanted nothing more than to end the distance between them and just—

A series of knocks in a familiar pattern startled them all. Mike jumped one foot away from Eleven, his face red as the Christmas decorations on the wall. Dustin and Lucas stopped their brawl to sit politely on their chairs on the table, and Will hurried up with his washing. Eleven tilted her head and used her powers to open the door.

Police chief Jim Hopper walked into the cabin, cigar in his mouth. He stopped at the entry and looked around, inspecting his surroundings. His eyes scrutinized everything, and even though they all knew that they hadn't done anything wrong, Hopper's silence as his sunglasses reflected on every part of his cabin terrified them. He finally sighed, and with one last drag of his cigarette, he looked at Eleven.

"The door wasn't locked," he said in his calm yet threatening and accusing tone.

"Look, Hops, it wasn't—"

"Justin, first off, don't call me Hops, and second, I don't care," he interrupted the kid.

"Actually, my name's—"

"Shut up. Now, you, young lady, should know that the locks must be always on. Because leaving the door open is pretty stupid, and..." He said, waving his hand for her to finish.

"We're not stupid," she said, looking disappointed at herself.

Mike didn't like seeing her like that.

"Chief, listen, we had the door locked, it's just that Max just left and—"

"Wheeler, don't sugar-coat me. When you little rascals begged me to come here, I established very simple ground rules, and you all agreed to them. How can I trust you that you won't do anything stupid if you constantly ignore authority and do whatever the hell you want? I'm trying to protect Eleven here. I thought *you*, of all people, would understand."

Mike was hurt by his words. He wanted to argue, he wanted to insult that bastard that had kept Eleven away from him for so long, but he couldn't because deep down he felt that Hopper was right. The chief was about to take another drag of his cigarette, but it suddenly flew out of his mouth and into the sink where Will was finishing cleaning up the mugs. Jim looked at Eleven and raised an eyebrow.

"Really?"

"It's bad for you," she told him with innocent eyes.

Hopper sighed and massaged his temples. Being a dad was hard.

"Alright, listen, it's almost Christmas and I'm too tired to argue or scold you. The Sun is getting really low, so you all should be leaving anyway. Say your goodbyes and go home," he told them, going to the fridge and getting a bear can for himself. When he turned around, they were all still in their places. "What am I speaking, Spanish? You're all going to meet again tomorrow at the Christmas dinner, for God's sake, it's not a farewell. Go before it gets dark. *Pronto*."

They all reluctantly stood up. Lucas and Dustin hugged Eleven and were about to leave when Hopper called them once again.

"Who's going with Will?" He asked.

"I'll go," Mike offered himself, and Hopper nodded at him. He didn't look as mad as he was with him just a minute ago.

The kids were soon outside the cabin, getting their bikes ready. As everyone else was about to leave, Eleven tugged Mike's coat so he would look at her. He did, and she looked like she wanted to say something.

"What is it?"

"Tonight?" She shyly asked, her eyes full of hope. Mike gave her his warmest smile.

"Of course, El."

"Seven – Three – Zero?"

"Seven – Three – Zero."

With that she smiled him back and gave him a quick hug before disappearing inside the cabin. Mike, feeling like Bard the Bowman after slaying the dragon Smaug, grabbed his bike, and in a minute he was pedaling with his friends until they reached a fork in the road.

"I'll see you guys tomorrow," Dustin said.

"Yeah, tell your mom to make some of her cookies. I love them!" Added Lucas.

"Don't worry, I will," Mike told them, and so Dustin and Lucas took a turn to the town while Mike and Will continued on the path to the Byers house.

"You know, you don't have to come with me," Will told him once they were pedaling alone, sounding a bit guilty. "You can turn around now and I'll tell my mom you went with me until the end of the street."

"Nah, it's okay, man. I don't mind it."

"I'm just... I don't want you to feel like you're babysitting me. It's just that my mom's still—"

"Will," he interrupted him, looking dead serious, "stop. I volunteered because I want to be here, okay? And it's not that I don't trust you, or that I think you need someone to be with you at all times. But I go to

sleep better if I know for a fact that you're okay, alright?"

Will seemed to consider his words for a second before smiling.

"Alright," he repeated a little happier now. "So, did you buy her something yet?"

Mike groaned. Tomorrow would be a very special day. It was Eleven's first Christmas ever. She had been excited about it ever since December started and they all introduced her to the Christmas Spirit. He remembered the look on her face when Hopper bought a Christmas tree and they all helped Eleven decorate it. She looked like she had a room full of Eggos. It was something extremely important for her, and thus, for him. It was one of her first holidays, the first one since she had reunited with the rest of the party. Hopper had even agreed to take her to the dinner at Mike's house, where they would all be together. It was a special occasion, and Mike wanted to make sure that it was perfect for her. He had taken it as a personal responsibility to make it the best Christmas ever for her, and that included buying her the perfect gift.

Which he hadn't found yet.

His groan was all the answer Will needed.

"Well, you have until tomorrow night. You should talk with Nancy, though, she's good with presents."

"Hard pass. Knowing her, she'll either make me spend a fortune or she'll want something completely ridiculous. This needs to be special, and it needs to come from me, you know?"

"Yeah, I can understand that. Well... good luck, man."

There was something else on his mind, though, and Mike could tell. After five blocks in silence, he couldn't stand it anymore.

"So, you're gonna tell me what's eating you? Or we're going to pretend you're not dying to tell me something?"

Will shook his head with a smile, knowing that he was caught.

"It's nothing serious, it's just... Can I ask you a question? And it's okay if you don't want to answer, I'll understand."

Mike looked at him. They were best friends and they told each other everything. What was he going to ask him that he wanted to reassure him that it was okay if he didn't answer?

"Shoot it," he told him.

"Are you and Eleven... like, dating or something?" He finally asked.

Jeez. He was definitely going with the heavy ammunition. Mike was slightly taken aback by the question. He didn't expect any of his friends to actually ask him that. Unknown to Will, that was a topic Mike questioned himself almost every night before falling asleep. It was something that worried him, something extremely important that he didn't know how to address. Now that Will had asked him about it, however, it seemed like the perfect opportunity to hear what someone else had to say about it. He had kept his thoughts and feelings for himself for too long. He could use a second opinion.

"Like I said, you don't have to answer," Will repeated, taking note of his friend's silence.

"No, no, it's okay, it's just that... it's... complicated. But I guess no, we're not really dating", he said, trying to organize his thoughts. "As of right now, we're just friends."

"I'd say you're a bit past that point," his friend remarked.

"I know. That's why it's complicated."

"Look, I'm sorry, I don't want to meddle..."

"Don't worry, Will. It's okay. You have my permission to meddle in my life," Mike said, before snickering at himself. "I could really use someone trying to talk some sense to me because I really feel like I'm lost here."

They kept pedaling for a few minutes in utter silence, each of them lost in their thoughts. It was Will the one who spoke first.

"What's stopping you?" He bluntly asked. "You waited months for her, you never gave up. Now you're finally together. You want to be with her and she wants to be with you."

"That's the problem, Will," Mike said, curling his lip. He sounded... almost defeated. Will looked at him, curious and worried. "I know that I *really* like her. I don't doubt that, I think it's obvious."

"It is pretty obvious, yes," his friend agreed, causing Mike to smile.

"But I don't know if she..." He trailed off, unable to finish the sentence. He couldn't find the words to explain everything that went through his head. So many thoughts, so many ideas, so many hopes, dreams, and fears. It was driving him insane, and he didn't know how to put all of that into words. Luckily for him, Will was good at interpreting.

"Mike, are you really doubting what she feels towards you?" He asked, trying not to sound too rude. "Dude, she obviously likes you. She likes you more than anyone else. Whenever you're in the same room with her it's like the rest of us don't matter."

"I know that. I can see that she likes me, I'm not stupid," he snapped, but he quickly realized that he was being mean to his friend. "Sorry. But, like, if she was anyone else it'd be much easier, but she's... her, and I love that, I really do, but it also complicates a lot of things. Because I know that she likes me, but I don't know if she understands what love is."

"I think she—"

"Just hear me out for a second," he interrupted, feeling the need to fully explain himself now that he had started. Will immediately shut up and let him talk. "I'm the very first person that treated her nice. She lived in my basement for a week right after he escaped that horrible lab, of course she's going to like me. But she doesn't know any better. Maybe... Maybe I'm the nicest person she has ever met, but that's not really saying much."

He felt a lump in his throat, and his eyes seemed to be itching for some reason. He decided to ignore all of that and kept talking.

"If I ask her out, she might say yes. She might even be happy about it. But in some way, it feels like I might be taking advantage of her. Like I said, she doesn't know any better. For all I know, I might only be her best friend."

"She kissed you. Twice."

"No, I kissed her twice. And the first time she was stunned. A few minutes ago she just asked me if you needed to ask permission to kiss someone. She definitely doesn't know what it means! How could I start dating her if I can't know if what she feels for me is real or not?"

Will had no comeback to that, and Mike had nothing else to add. In a way, it was relieving to finally speak his mind, to share his deep thoughts. It also made him feel suddenly miserable, because it was definitely a subject that meant a lot to him, and all these doubts were killing him. He knew that asking Eleven out and getting a positive response would be the best thing that had ever happened to him in his life. It was his biggest dream. But there was something that he cared more about than his own happiness, and that was doing what was best for Eleven.

"I think," Will began, getting Mike's attention, "that you're overthinking this."

"What?"

"You definitely have some valid points. It's actually a pretty mature decision you're taking. But I guess that's the thing, Mike, you're acting like it's up to you to decide what's best for her. And I honestly feel like you're underestimating Eleven. She's not stupid."

"I didn't—"

"I know you didn't say that, but still. She's very smart. You can help her understand what she doesn't know, but don't pretend like you have to decide what she wants or doesn't want *because you know better*. Let her make her own choices; that's the only way she'll learn."

The end of the street and Will's house was coming into view. They could even see Jonathan washing his car in the distance. Mike

could've stopped there, say goodbye to Will now that they knew Jonathan was there, and go back to his house, but he was so lost in his thoughts, soaking in his friend's words, that he kept pedaling until they were almost at the driveway.

"Mike?" Asked Will. Mike simply looked at him. "You owe yourself to do what you feel it's best for you too. If you're not sure about what she feels, or if she understands what it would mean, then just sit down and talk it out with her. Help her understand."

Jonathan called their names and waved his hand, and they both greeted him too. Mike stopped, and Will got out of his bike.

"Thanks for coming," he told his friend with a smile on his face.

"Don't mention it. It's nothing. And... and thank you, too. So... I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Of course!"

"Alright, then. See ya later." Mike was about to turn around and head home, but Will called him again. He stopped and looked at him.

"The way she looks at you, how happy she is whenever you're with her... I'm not an expert, but if that's not real... then I don't know what is."

Mike smiled at him and nodded in silence for a few seconds.

"Later, Will."

"Later, Mike."

"Alright, time's up," said Mike, resting his green pencil on the table. "Let's compare now."

Holly also stopped drawing, leaving her crayons away and quickly showing her big brother her progress. There were a lot of scribbles and some big spots of color. It was hard to figure out what was drawn there, but he was used to interpreting his sister's pieces of art. Mike exaggerated a gasp and opened up his eyes wide in

astonishment.

"Wow! That's amazing! Is it a princess? Holly, it's wonderful, have you been practicing behind my back?" He asked, squinting his eyes and poking his little sister's nose with his finger.

Holly giggled and scratched her nose.

"Mommy draws with me too," she softly told him.

"Oh, I see," he said, suddenly lowering his voice, dropping his shoulders and looking down. "You probably like drawing with her more than you do with me, don't you? You're just moving on from your dumb brother."

"No! I like drawing with you!" She told him, jumping onto his lap and hugging him, afraid of having hurt his feelings. Mike hugged her with a smile on his face and stroked her back. "Even if you draw silly."

He backed away from her, frowning. She didn't seem to regret her words at all.

"Will draws better," she even added with a smile. "He drew me a castle."

He just snickered.

"Yeah, he's pretty great actually."

A beeping sound caught his attention. It was the alarm on his wristwatch. Seven twenty-five pm.

"Hey Molly, since you're getting so good at coloring, what do you think about finishing my drawing?" He said, showing her his progress. "It's Luke Skywalker. You know him, right? It's on the poster in my bedroom door. You can look at that and copy the colors. What do you say?"

She excitedly nodded, grabbing his sheet of paper and running upstairs with her crayons. When she was gone, Mike finally let out a sigh. He wasn't good at drawing, but he would do it for Holly. He couldn't say no to that sweet pouting face. He checked out his watch

one more time just in case and then sprinted to the basement. He closed the door behind him and headed straight to the blanket fort he had built over a year ago as a shelter for a vulnerable girl he and his friends had found under the rain in the middle of the woods.

He sat there with three more minutes to spare. He closed the blankets to have some sense of privacy, set up his supercomm in a random channel that would give him static, placed it in front of him, took a deep breath, and began to prepare himself.

One of Hopper's rules was that no phone calls were allowed. No contact of any kind was to be had outside their scheduled visits twice a week. No surprise visits, no phone calls, no letters, nothing. They had all reluctantly agreed to it, but unknown to the chief of police – or at least that's what they believed–, one of the boys had found a way to be with her every day.

Mike couldn't even imagine the possibility of spending one day without seeing or hearing from Eleven. After three hundred and fifty-three days waiting for her, not knowing whether she was dead or alive, and with only his hope to carry him through, he wasn't willing to be separated from her any longer. Even though he wanted nothing more than to just ignore Hopper's warnings and bike to his cabin every day and meet her in person, he knew that the Chief was just doing what was best for her. It was hard to accept it, but it was the right thing to do, so he didn't break the rules, he didn't visit her outside their scheduled times.

But that didn't mean they couldn't be together in other ways.

His wristwatch beeped again, signaling it was seven thirty. It was time. He tried to keep a steady rhythm in his breathing, relaxing his body and mind. The static of the supercomm helped him lose all distractions. Once he felt calm enough, he closed his eyes and whispered a single word.

"Eleven."

He waited for a few seconds, only aware of the static noise and the darkness within the fort. Nothing happened, so he tried again.

"*El, can you hear me?*" He said as soft as humanly possible. "*I'm here, EL.*"

"*Mike.*"

As always, a chill went up his spine when he heard her voice. Even after Eleven came back to his life, Mike kept talking to his supercomm every single night. He had done it for three hundred and fifty-three days, and he would do it for a thousand more if he had to. The obvious difference was that now he knew she would be listening. So every night he talked to her about everything, anything, from how much he missed her to what a snowball fight was. He would tell her about his day, about what he and the guys were planning to do, sometimes he would even grab one of his books and read to her. He didn't find it awkward, knowing that she was on the other side, listening to his every word. It was a welcomed change, but it wasn't the biggest change of all.

Now that he *knew* she was there and that her existence wasn't a secret, Eleven could use her powers more freely around him. Instead of just sitting in silence, listening to him, she began trying to make contact. To talk back. It took her a while, but she had finally figured out how to do it.

"*Mike,*" she repeated inside his head. "*Breathe.*"

He did. He tried to relax his body and focus only on her voice. He thought about her and pictured her face in his mind. He did his best to help her create a connection, to allow her access to his mind. A few seconds later, he felt it. Goosebumps all over his body and another more powerful chill going through his spine. His body felt lighter and lighter, his breathing became steadier, and he felt the familiar sensation like there was a string attached to his core that someone was gently pulling forward.

His body remained still, but he felt himself being pushed forward. The force was getting stronger with each second, and as suddenly as it started it ended. He inhaled deeply and opened up his eyes.

Absolute darkness. It was like a room with no end, an infinite space of nothingness. No walls, no roof, only an invisible floor where he

was suddenly standing. He could see his own body, his clothes, his hands, but nothing else. The Void, as they called it. He looked around, but she was nowhere to be found. There was nothing to be seen.

"El?" He called out loud.

He knew he shouldn't be afraid, but he couldn't help himself. The pure darkness of it terrified him. Not to mention that was the place where Eleven had first encountered the Demogorgon. What if there was another one on the loose there?

"Mike!"

He turned around at breakneck speed. She was suddenly there, with her curly, damp, and recently-showered hair framing her smiling face. She was wearing her pajamas, an old, long shirt, and some regular pants. She wasn't trying to look pretty, she wasn't trying to look good for him. She was herself, and that was enough. Mike smiled in relief. As scary as the Void was, having Eleven by his side always made him feel safe.

The two of them walked towards each other. He smiled at her, she smiled back, and then they sat on the floor, as close as they could be while being careful as to not touch each other. Nothing could ever replace the experience of being together in real life, but considering they really couldn't do it as often as they wish they could, this was definitely the second best way.

"How are you?" He asked her.

"Tired," Eleven admitted, her eyelids dropping heavily for a second, "but good."

Mike tutted.

"You shouldn't have used your powers so much during the snowball fight, you know it drains you," he told her, his face suddenly looking worried. "Look, if you're feeling too tired just tell me and we can—"

"Mike," she interrupted him, looking intently at his eyes. "I'm good."

He stared at her, trying to figure out whether she was being honest or not.

"Alright," he finally said with half a smile, "you should probably try to use your powers a little less next time anyway, though. But what did you think of it? Did you like it?"

"It was fun. Very fun."

"Cool. I'm glad you liked it."

"Did you... have fun?" She asked.

"Of course! I always have a blast with the guys when we play during winter. And it's..." He trailed off, not knowing if he should say what he was thinking. She leaned her head forward just a bit, though, like she was trying to get a better look at him, waiting for him to continue; and so he did. "You know... It's nice being able to play with you too. It's like the whole party is together again, and we even have Max now. It feels... good, being together without worrying about saving Will, or keeping you safe from the people from the lab. Just a group of friends hanging out together. It's great."

"Friends..." she repeated, looking in the distance, at the vast nothingness.

"The best ones," he added, contemplating her just as profusely as she was staring at the infinite darkness. It wasn't that uncommon for her to get lost in her own thoughts, maybe considering something, maybe trying to come up with the right words to express herself. He patiently waited for her, taking the time to just let himself admire all her features.

It wasn't long before she looked back at him, her eyebrows frowned.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Are there... different... types? Of friends?" The last part seemed more like an afterthought, one that he was glad she had since he hadn't understood her question at first.

He straightened himself and took a hand to scratch his head.

"Well, yes. You can have friends from school, or maybe some neighbors, or people you spend some time with, but you don't... You don't have a really strong bond with them, you know? You may see them every day, and maybe you talk with them when you can, but they're just school friends, you're only close together because you have to see them at certain times. And when school's over, you don't really care too much to be with them."

"Lucas, Dustin and Will go to school with you", she pointed out. "Max too."

"Yes, they do, but they're *also* my best friends. Remember how I said there were *school friends*? There's another type, your *best friends*. That's when you have a lot in common with them, you always have fun together, and even if you fight sometimes, you know that they will always have your back, and you know that you will always be friends, no matter what. Are you with me so far?"

She looked puzzled.

"Yes," she answered, looking at herself and then at him like he was asking a stupid question. He just smiled at himself.

"Ok. So you can have best friends, even more than one, and they are the ones you would rather spend your whole free time with. But you can also have just one best friend. That's okay, too."

"Is Max Lucas's best friend?"

He was surprised by the question, and even more by how quickly she asked it. Almost like she had been thinking carefully about it. Almost like that's what she wanted to know all along.

"Why do you ask?" He replied, trying to figure out her intentions.

"They feel different. Not like Lucas and Dustin. Not like Will and Max. It feels... They... It's not..."

After the fourth attempt to finish her idea, she just pressed her knees against her chest and lowered her chin, frowning at the floor. She

hated it when she couldn't fully explain herself, it bothered her and it made her feel dumb.

"Hey, it's okay," Mike quickly told her, moving his hand to grab her shoulder before quickly realizing what he was doing and stopping midair. "Look, I understand what you mean."

She looked up at him with hopeful eyes.

"You do?"

"Yeah. And you're right... kinda. She's not his best friend, not really, but that's because they're more than friends."

She blinked a couple of times, straightening up and tilting her head to the right.

"More than friends?"

He cleared his throat.

"Yeah, you know... They like each other. Romantically."

Mike decided to study her face as he said it. He wanted to see her reaction, to determine how much she knew about it. She evidently knew something, since her eyes grew in size and she opened her mouth, looking absolutely startled. Not only did she look cute with her surprised expression, it was also a really good sign for Mike.

"Are they... in love?" She asked almost in a whisper.

"I guess. But they don't want to admit it," he told her.

Eleven nodded, and soon her face blushed and she giggled. She looked like a little girl, and Mike loved every second of it. Still, there was something he needed to know.

"Do you...?" He started, his throat going suddenly dry. He gulped and tried it again. "You know what it means to be in love... right?"

Eleven stopped giggling, and her smile hesitated for a bit. She looked at the floor for a second, before meeting his eyes and slowly nodding.

He stared at her and held his breath. It seemed like neither of them needed to blink. They just kept looking straight into each others' eyes.

"How do you know?" He eventually asked, trying to sound casual, like it was totally not a big deal.

"Movies. And Hopper," she said. "I asked. He says people love someone when they're their favorite person. They're happy. They want to be together. They care."

Mike was impressed by how accurate she was able to boil it down. She still needed to practice her speech, but her innocent view of the world sometimes proved to be more touching and honest than anyone else's. Sometimes it warmed up his heart to listen to her way of understanding things. He smiled at her.

"That's pretty right, actually," he confessed. She nodded in silence, her soulful eyes fixed on him.

He was about to ask her a question, something along the lines of '*Have you ever fallen in love with someone? Like, me, for example?*', but just as he was opening his mouth she let out a silent yawn, soon moving a hand up to rub her eyes. She looked like a little kid in need of a nap.

"You're tired, El."

"I'm good."

"You need to rest."

"No," she sternly told him, opening her eyes and looking at her friend, acting like she was okay. "I'm good," she repeated.

Mike shook his head with a half smile.

"*Friends don't lie*," he said.

She opened her mouth to retort, but after a few seconds hesitating she looked down at the floor, dropping her head and shoulders with a defeated expression.

"I'm tired," she finally admitted, before immediately looking up back at him, "but I don't want to go."

"I don't want you to go either," he said, and her face lightened up, "but you need to get some sleep. We played for hours today, and you used your powers. We'll see each other tomorrow at the Christmas dinner anyway, and we'll talk *a lot* then, okay?"

She didn't seem to be particularly happy by having to cut their meeting so short, but in the end, she nodded and smiled at him.

"Okay," she agreed.

She proceeded to close her eyes and straighten her posture, and Mike knew that meant the mind link would be over soon. He was about to say goodbye to her, but mentioning the Christmas dinner made him remember something.

"Wait, El!" He said, and she opened her eyes immediately, looking at him with a curious expression. "Before you go, can I ask you something?"

She nodded, her whole body leaning towards him. Mike cleared his throat again and prepared the question in his mind.

"Is there something you want, or maybe something you really need? Something you wish you could have. Like, um, if you could make a wish for something, what would you ask?"

After he was done, he watched her intently. She leaned back into her sitting position and her eyes traveled through the vast nothingness of the void. She furrowed her brows and pursed her lips. He didn't rush her, he just waited for her to think of something. He started to rapidly bounce his knee, wondering if he had been clear enough or if he had just confused her. He also questioned whether it was okay or not to bluntly ask her about what he should get her for Christmas. He was supposed to come up with something on his own to make it special. But he was running out of time, and he had run out of ideas. What better way to give her the perfect gift than to ask her what she needed the most?

As patience as he was, though, it made him anxious how long she was taking to answer. She was looking at the endless horizon, her face furrowed in concentration. At least she was taking it seriously, which was good. After several minutes of silence, a tiny smile appeared on her face. He saw the corner of her lips slowly lifting up, and a soft blush spreading on her cheeks.

She slowly turned her face around, strangely avoiding meeting his eyes at first.

"El?" He asked in a low voice.

After a few more seconds, she finally looked up. He waited for her to say anything, but she just kept staring at his face. Sometimes he felt they could speak without the need for words, like if a simple look could tell more than the most eloquent sentence. For the first time in a long time, though, he couldn't interpret her eyes. They looked so intense, so focused on his face. He knew she was trying to tell him something, but how could he understand what she meant? He couldn't possibly just take a guess and hope to be right. He had asked her what she wanted the most in the world, and she was just staring at—

Holy shit.

This... This couldn't be happening, could it? She probably didn't mean... She was just... He was making stuff up. He... She couldn't possibly...

His throat was suddenly dry, and his beating heart was threatening to pound its way out of his chest. He had to wipe his sweaty hands on his jeans and gulped at least three times before letting out a very unmanly shriek. He cleared his throat, and he could have sworn that he could see his own blush being reflected in Eleven's eyes.

"W-Well? An... Anything in mind?" He asked.

She just smiled at his goofiness.

"You. I wish I could be with you more... often," she answered, after struggling for a few seconds to remember the last word. It absolutely

melted Mike's heart.

"T-That would be awesome," he said, smiling back at her. "Sometimes I want to just... ignore Hopper and take you out on a d- I mean, take you to town. Get an ice cream. Show you the arcades. We could even go watch a movie, they re-released *Pinocchio* this week, I know you would love it. I just..." He sighed and softly shook his head.

He was still quite shocked by her words. Pretty touched by them, too. Did she really want to be him with so much? It made him jubilant but it also added to the big mess he had in his mind regarding his relationship with her. Maybe Will was right, after all. Maybe it was real for her. He shrugged those thoughts off. He was way too happy and excited right now to let himself overthink stuff. And besides, as touching as her words were, she hadn't really told him what he could get for her.

"But El, besides... well, what you just said, is there anything you can think of that you'd like to have?"

"Not really," she honestly said without even giving it a second thought, and Mike knew she was telling the truth.

"Okay, then," he said. "Thank you."

"Thank *you*," she repeated.

And then she moved her hand towards his. She didn't slow down, and he decided he wouldn't stop her. Not this time. Her fingers got closer to touch his own, but when contact should've happened, her hand just phased through his, and the parts where they touched became a smoke that dispersed in the air. He wasn't a fan of seeing his body dissolving into the Void, but even though no real contact was made, he could still feel something in his real body. It was a tingly sensation on the back of his hand like someone was touching him with a light feather. It wasn't much, it could never replace the feeling of their hands touching in real life, but just knowing that he could feel at least a ghost of her touch was enough for him.

Now that they had touched, their bodies gradually became blurry. It wouldn't be too long before the mind link was broken on its own. As

they both started to fade away, Mike felt a chill on his spine, a tingly sensation running through his whole body. Before their meeting would end, he did his best to close his hand to where he assumed her wrist would be. He could feel his palm tingling, and he smiled as he closed his eyes, getting ready to go back to his body. He felt heavier by the second, like someone was pressing their hands on his shoulders and pulling him down. He knew he'd be home soon, and he tried to relax.

Just when his arms and legs began tensing up, he felt another thing, a new sensation, like someone was caressing his cheek with a feather, just for an instant, before hearing the echo of a '*smek*' sound followed by a ghostly "*Night, Mike*".

He opened his eyes, only to find himself sitting inside the blanket fort in his basement. He quickly raised his left hand, brushing his cheek in the same place he had felt that tingling with the tip of his fingers. A smile spread on his face, and he let out a chuckle. He knew that sometimes Eleven would keep an eye on him for a few seconds after the connection was lost, so he just looked straightforward, imagining that she was there, that she was looking at him in the eye.

"Good night, El," he told her, hoping that she would listen.

Nancy was in the middle of a very important call when she heard a knock on her door. She sighed. With two younger siblings and a nosey mother, she knew that privacy was a luxury she seldom could enjoy. Even so, was it too much to ask for the chance of having an uninterrupted phone call? Couldn't they just leave her alone for forty-eight minutes?

"Hang on a second," she said to the phone, before pressing her end of the tube against her shoulder. "Who's there?"

"*Nancy, can I come in?*"

She rolled her eyes. What could Mike possibly want to do in her room at eleven pm?

"I'm busy, Mike," she told him, putting the phone back on her ear.

"Ok, so, maybe after dinner we can go to –?"

Her plan making was interrupted by her annoying thirteen years old brother bursting inside and closing the door behind him.

"Mike! I'm busy," she repeated, looking sternly at him.

"Can we talk for a second?" He asked her, looking determined to ruin her night.

"Not now. Seriously, I'm in the middle of–"

"Please, I... I really need to talk with you," he pleaded.

She almost dropped the phone. All trace of annoyance left her face as she paid attention to her little brother. She was astonished by his tone. He didn't sound obnoxious, angry, or like he was up to something mischievous. He truly sounded... desperate. His eyes were almost screaming for help, and his grimace made him look like a stranded boy. Mike could be a pain in the ass sometimes. Most of the time, actually. But he was still her little brother, the one she had taken care of since they were kids. She knew him more than he knew himself, and she could tell that whatever was going on with him was something serious.

Sorry Jonathan, but blood is thicker than water.

"Listen, I'll call you back, okay? Sorry," she said, hanging up before he could even say goodbye. She stood up and walked next to her brother, resting a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay? What happened?"

He sighed and walked away from her touch, sitting on the edge of the bed. He was shaking his head, and he didn't even look at her, not even when she sat down right next to him. She was positively getting more worried by the minute. This wasn't normal for Mike. He was usually above most things, having ridiculous plans for everything and pretending like he was a grown-up who could resolve anything on his own. She was used to the pretentious Mike who would try to pretend that he had everything under control, not the hunched over kid with a bouncing knee and fidgeting fingers that was next to her.

"This has to stay between us, ok?" Was the first thing he said, still avoiding her eyes.

"Yeah, of course. So what is it?"

He sighed and threw himself back, falling on her bed, staring at the ceiling.

"How do you know if someone likes you?" He finally said.

Nancy was stunned. She had to go over that question a few times in her head to make sure that she understood what he meant. After making sure that she hadn't misheard him, she slapped herself so hard in the forehead that the sound startled Mike.

"Oh... my... God," she said, her eyes closed as she massaged her temples. "Are you...? Jesus, Mike, I was worried sick about you! I thought something bad had happened! Of course Eleven likes you, dork! You shouldn't even have to ask me or anyone to figure it out! How thickheaded can you be?"

Truth be told, she wasn't as mad as she pretended to be. Yes, she was scared about his behavior, and she had honestly believed that something terrible had happened for him to have that thoughtful look in his eyes. And yes, she couldn't believe that her little brother was seriously doubting whether Eleven liked him or not. Nancy knew he was talking about El, it was damn obvious. The way he always talked about her, the way he looked at her... He couldn't fool anyone, he had a crush on her. But if he was obvious about his feelings, what could be said about Eleven? Unlike Mike, the girl wasn't ashamed of showing her preference for Mike over everyone else, and she didn't even try to pretend that he wasn't her favorite person in the world. Even a blind man could see that their feelings were mutual. So yes, it bothered her that he could be so dumb that he was doubting what El felt for him.

All things considered, though, she found his question extremely cute. Stupid, yes, but adorable. It meant that he was at least willing to admit that what she felt for him mattered a lot, and that he was worried about it. Only a year ago he still believed girls were grossed. And now he wanted to have a little girlfriend. Nancy couldn't be

happier, and she wanted to just shriek and hug him.

"It's not..." He began with a defensive tone, but he quickly gave up, sitting up with a defeated look. "Ok. Yes. I'm talking about Eleven. But... I'll just rephrase the question: how do you know if what some— Well, shit. How can I know if what she feels for me is real or not?"

Now that was quite a change.

He wasn't asking if Eleven liked him. He seemed to imply he already knew that. He was asking whether that feeling he believed she had for him was real or not, and that seemed to be quite a strange question. Then again, it was Michael Wheeler she was talking about. He had asked stranger things before.

"What do you mean by 'real'?" She carefully asked.

Mike sighed and stood up. He began pacing back and forth her room, looking at the floor like he was counting each step. She had seen him like this before, but only when he was anxious and staying quiet and still wasn't an option anymore.

"I mean, real, as in 'it's actually love'. Like, you used to date Steve!" He said, stopping just to look at her. "You said you loved him, you would kiss him, but then it turns out you loved Jonathan."

That was a sucker punch. A low blow. Nancy flustered and a sense of discomfort and anger started to boil inside her.

"Hey, don't say it like that!" She replied, crossing her arms in front of her chest. "I didn't... lie to Steve. I really liked him. I thought I loved him. But sometimes you just—"

"I'm not pointing a finger at you," he interrupted her, before resuming his pacing. "I'm not saying it was a bad thing to do. But it happened. You thought you liked him, but it didn't work out in the end. And you **know** what love is, you **know** what it's supposed to feel like. You **know** that. If it happened to you... How could...? What if...?"

He had to stop again, this time to just take his hands to his head and start pulling his hair. He groaned in exasperation, and that was the moment when Nancy realized this was just as bad as she had initially

thought. It wasn't a stupid question. Not for Mike. For him, this meant everything, and she had made fun of it. Of course she liked to tease him, that's what big sisters were for, but he also loved Mike. She loved him a lot. He was her little brother, for God's sake! She would face a dozen Demogorgons if that meant he wouldn't be sad.

She stood up and hugged him. She embraced him and pulled him closer to her body, letting him know that she was there for him. He tried to push her away at first, but just a few seconds into it he gave up, allowing her to hug him. She dragged him to the bed and forced him to sit down right next to her. Only when she was sure he wouldn't stand up again she let him go.

"Mike, I can't help you if you won't tell me exactly what's going on," she said.

And he complied. He told her everything. Apparently, he had talked to this issue with Will just a few hours ago, and that somehow made it easier for him to confess his deepest fears one more time. Nancy forgot about Jonathan altogether, about their phone call and the date they wanted to have after tomorrow's dinner. All her focus was put into what Mike was telling her.

When he was done, he looked almost ashamed of himself.

"Will says I'm overthinking stuff," he said, "but it doesn't feel that way for me. Because I don't want to ask El to be my girlfriend if she doesn't know what that means, and all the things it would change between us. It could ruin everything for us in the long run. And I..."

He groaned and looked at the floor. His jaw was clenched, and he seemed to be considering whether or not he was really going to say his next sentence.

"You'll call me stupid, but I love her, okay?" He said, turning his head to look defiantly at her, daring her to say something. "I know I'm thirteen, I know that I'm a nerdy geek who doesn't know any better, I know that she's literally the first girl who ever paid any kind of attention to me, alright? I know. But I also know that this isn't some stupid summer crush, I know what I feel! So before you tell me that it's not really love, then you better--"

"I know you love her," she calmly said, giving him a warm smile.

He blinked a couple of times.

"You do?"

"Of course."

"Aren't you going to tell me that I think that way just because I'm too young?"

"No."

"Who are you and what have you done with Nancy?"

"Mike, I know you're young, but what you've been through is more than what many go through in their entire lives," she simply told him, shrugging her shoulders. "And she changed your world, just as much as you changed hers. You're talking about you being the one that saved her life like it's a bad thing, like that means she owes you and that if she loves you because of it, it means she's not really in love, she's just grateful. And that's bullshit, Mike. Just think about it the other way: how could she NOT love you after all you've done for her? She could meet a thousand new guys, and they could all be prettier than you, but could she ever find someone as willing to risk their lives for her as you do? Come on, Mikey, give you some credit."

The fact that he didn't punch her in the arm after she used his toddler nickname was a good sign. He just remained still, looking at her with a face that looked halfway between a pout and a hopeful expression.

"If you want my *girly-sixth-sense* advice, which you obviously do, I'll say that nothing would make Eleven happier than to find out that you two can become something that celebrates your mutual love," she said with a smile. "You two lovebirds belong together. You have everything you need to be happy together. You have chemistry, a history, and the most important thing... a shared trauma that bonded you together."

He was as speechless as she had been when someone else said those same words to her not so long ago. Bauman definitely knew his stuff.

Neither of them said anything else. Nancy knew he would need a couple of minutes to just process everything she had just said to him. She had nothing else to add, really, and she just hoped everything so far had been enough for him to sort out his problems. A couple of minutes later, Mike slowly stood up. She was worried he would start walking in circles again, but he just pointed a finger at her.

"No one has to know about this conversation," he said, trying to make it sound like a threat. She pretended to close a zipper over her lips. "This stays between you and me. No one else."

"Come on, Mike, why would I want to let everyone know that my little brother actually has a heart and is going through emotional changes?"

"I'm serious. Don't fucking tell anyone, not even Jonathan."

"Watch your language, twerp. And like I said, you don't have to worry. The world will never know the most caring part of Mike Wheeler."

He rolled his eyes and started to walk away from her. He stopped a few steps away from the door before turning his head back.

"Thank you," he told her.

"You're welcome, Mikey."

"Don't call me that."

"You should get her a present for tomorrow."

"I know. I will."

"Do you know what it's going to be?"

He just nodded his head. Nancy raised an eyebrow. Knowing him, he would probably buy El a plastic lightsaber or something like that.

"You sure don't want my advice on it?" She hopefully asked.

"Don't worry, she already told me what she wants," he explained,

before looking at the suddenly very interesting carpet floor. "I just wanted to talk with you before going for it."

And without further words, he left the room leaving Nancy alone, wondering what that mystery gift was going to be.

The next morning and afternoon passed incredibly fast for Mike.

He woke up even before his alarm clock rang, and he had the quickest shower in his life. During breakfast, his mom reminded him that he needed to help with the decorations and making sure that the house would in perfect conditions to receive all their visits for dinner. After almost choking himself to death when he drank a whole glass of water with half a pancake in his mouth, he told her that he would help with everything, but that he needed to go to the mall first. Karen wasn't happy about that, but as soon as he started babbling about how this had to be the best Christmas ever and that he needed to buy a last minute present and too many excuses for her to register them all, she simply gave up.

Mike grabbed his coat and all his savings before jumping onto his bike and pedaled all the way to the mall. It was always a pleasure to go through the streets of Hawkings during Christmas Eve. The snowstorm of the 22th was still present in the form of a white blanket that covered most of the city. He saw a lot of familiar faces on his way to the mall, and he wished them all a Merry Christmas. He hadn't been this excited for Christmas ever since he was a little kid.

His actual time in the mall was more than he had anticipated. He knew what he wanted to buy, but only on a generic level. When he walked into the store he realized that there were too many options to choose from, and his limited knowledge didn't help at all. It was almost noon when he finally came back home, his wallet empty but with butterflies of excitements in his stomach and a bulge in his coat pocket.

He got scolded for not helping during the whole morning, so the rest of the afternoon was spent doing all types of chores, from cleaning the driveway to scrub every square inch of the bathroom. He wasn't totally invested in those activities, though, for his mind was busy

imagining how the evening could unfold. All the things he would say, everything he would do, all the ways it could go right, and all the ways it could go wrong.

He had so many things to do and so much to think of that he didn't realize how much time had passed until his mom told him to have another shower and get ready. Mike finished hanging the mistletoe and rushed to his room. He barely had enough time to put on his khakis and grab his white-stripped, blue sweater (with white snowflakes on it) before the bell rang and the first guests arrived. He hand-combed his hair, put on some cologne and then he went downstairs.

Dustin and his mom had arrived. Karen was talking about the wonderful casserole Claudia had brought along, and the two of them went all the way to the kitchen talking about how great it was that their kids had organized a Christmas dinner between their families. Meanwhile, Dustin was looking beaming for the compliments Nancy was giving him about his look. If it wasn't because he truly looked like the happiest man in the world, Mike would have intervened and said to him that those white red sneakers looked awful with that yellow sweater and the reindeer on it. He wondered when would Steve Harrington give him another class on how to dress.

He almost felt bad that Steve couldn't attend the reunion. He said he had some compromises with his own family, but Mike knew that he just didn't want to be in the same room as Nancy and Jonathan. Not because he hated them, but because it hurt him.

After the Hendersons arrived, it wasn't long before the doorbell rang again and the Sinclairs joined the celebration. Lucas was wearing a plain red sweater that looked actually really cool with his blue jeans and white sneakers. Not that Mike knew much about fashion. His little sister didn't seem to be too excited about being there, but as soon as she found out Holly was painting some drawings on the kiddie table she decided to join her. Lucas's mom joined the other two moms at the table where they were discussing the lack of activeness of men. Meanwhile, Mr. Sinclair and Ted Wheeler were sitting on the sofa, legs spread out, sharing a beer and talking about the last World Series.

Half an hour later, the bell rang for the third time. The Byers had arrived, but they didn't come alone. Mike almost dropped the ginger man cookie he was eating when he saw Hopper and Eleven were with them.

It was shocking on its own to see Hopper dressed in formal clothes, but he found himself paying barely any attention to him, Will –he only noticed his green and red sweater–, Jonathan –who had to pretend like he was trying to scratch his ear when Mike didn't respond to his high five– or Joyce –who oddly enough seemed to let him walk past her. All his eyes could focus on was the girl standing in front of him, her curly hair, and that beautiful light-pink dress that she was wearing. It was like a prettier version of that old piece of clothing they stole from Nancy when they first met Eleven. It brought a lot of memories to Mike, some happier than others, but overall it just made her look like the Eleven he had fallen in love with.

"Hi, Mike," she said, stopping in front of him, checking his clothes just as much as she was looking at hers.

"Hey, El. You... You look..."

He wanted to say gorgeous, but he knew Hopper was glaring at him a few feet away from them and he didn't want to push his luck.

"Pretty?" She offered, and that look in her eyes and how she arched her eyebrows was all he needed to know that she hadn't chosen that dress on accident.

"Pretty," he confirmed with several nods. "Prettier than ever."

Hoppers groan, Joyce's sudden excuse to drag him away from the young pair of friends and the rest of the guy's giggling went unnoticed by both kids, who had lost themselves in each others' eyes for the ten thousandth time in the last month.

"Hey, Mike, can we play something in your basement?" Asked Dustin, eager to beat Lucas at something. He was still resenting his lost at Battleship last week.

"Sure! Let's go!" He said.

Without even asking for permission, he grabbed El by the hand and together they led the rest of the party to the basement.

That was the first time the kids had even suggested that their families should spend Christmas Eve together. It was such an important holiday, with a strong sense of family and that relied too heavily on how close you should be with them. They knew that it was asking their parents too much. But this was Eleven's first Christmas, and even though Hopper and she would've probably gone with the Byers, there was no way that the rest of the guys –Mike especially– wouldn't be with her. It took some coaxing, lots of promises of good behavior, and some fake-crying –Dustin's mom was a sucker for her son's crocodile tears–, but they finally convinced them to try it. This was their test, to see if it worked or if it would just ruin Christmas for everyone.

Judging by the results, it was the start of a great tradition.

Everyone had the time of their lives. The kids were obviously going to have it, since they were playing with their best friends, but even the grown-ups found themselves fully entertained. Having other adults to talk with allowed them to share stories they could never do in front of their kids, either by said story's content or simply because they wouldn't care for it. They drank wine and beer, they talked about their kids, about sports, about town, about literally everything, and they had a wonderful evening. Nancy and Jonathan also had a great time together, having time to sort out the final details of the date they were planning to have after the evening was done. Even Holly and Erica had a lot of fun, playing with dolls and drawing together.

Dinner itself was wonderful. Every guest had brought along something to share, and Karen had outdone herself to prepare her biggest, most delicious plates ever. It wasn't often that she could have so many visits to her house, so she was determined to impress them all. And she did. Everyone ate until their clothes threatened to tear apart. It had been finger-licking good.

Almost an hour had passed since then, and Mike, who was coming from the upstairs bathroom –and a quick visit to his room–, decided

to stop in the last step of the stairs to take a look at what everyone was doing. Will had joined Holly at her table, and the girl watched him draw with awed eyes. He was clearly proud of the attention he was getting, and Mike could hear him sing his own version of a Christmas carol.

"Draw a new castle for Holly, falalalala, la la la la!"

He smiled. No wonder Holly liked him so much. His eyes moved over where Erica was tugging her mother's dress, asking her something that he couldn't hear. Whatever it was, Mrs. Sinclair decided to ignore it to keep talking with Karen and Claudia. On the kitchen, Mike's and Lucas's dads were still together, laughing out loud at some joke one of them had just told. Through the window he could see the silhouettes of

Mike moved on to the other side of the room, and he found Nancy and Jonathan standing against a wall oogling each other, something he found absolutely vomit-inducing. He quickly walked past them, swearing to God that he would kill Jonathan if he ever saw them doing something more than a kiss. He walked over to where Dustin and Lucas were playing Battlefield. He stood behind a beaming Dustin. Lucas was sweating bullets, and his hands were shaking like an old man's when he had to remove one of his ships from the game.

"Hey, Mike, check this out, I'm beating the crap out of Lucas," Dustin told him with a smile from ear to ear.

"You're just two ships ahead!" The other boy replied.

"That will be enough for me to wipe the floor with your ass."

Mike looked at Dustin's pieces over the boy's shoulder.

"Hey, Lucas, don't look at me," he said, which earned him a weird look from his neighbor. "I won't **see for** you."

It took Lucas a couple of seconds before realizing that no, Mike hadn't lost his mind.

"C-4," he said, to which Dustin mouthed an obscenity. Lucas smiled and put a red flag on his radar.

"G-6."

"You totally missed, buddy."

"God damn it!"

"You know what," said Mike, raising his hands and with a smile on his face, "I should probably go **before** Dustin's language sticks on me."

"B-4," Lucas said, his amused smile growing by the way Dustin took his hat off and threw it away.

"Son of a bitch!"

Mike laughed as he walked away to the sofa, where Eleven was waiting for him. He felt strangely happy, knowing that she hadn't moved an inch since he excused himself to go to the bathroom and his room. She smiled back at him when he approached her and sat next to her.

"Are you having fun so far?" He asked her, to which she nodded in response.

"I like Christmas," she added after a few seconds.

"I'm glad you do. It's a really great holiday."

"Mike?" She suddenly asked, a little smile spreading across her face and her eyes staring anxiously at him.

"Yes?"

She just pointed a finger at the walls. Mike followed the direction she was aiming at and immediately realized what she meant. His cheeks blushed.

"Yes, El. That's mistletoe."

She nodded in silence, probably happy for figuring it out on her own. The silence grew between them for a few seconds until Mike decided there was no point in delaying the inevitable.

"El, come with me, will you?"

She didn't need to be asked twice. She would have followed him straight to the upside down if he asked her to. They both stood up, and Mike guided her to the back exit, away from everyone else. Like the gentleman he was –or at least the gentleman that Eleven turned him into everytime he was with her–, he held the door open for her, and they both found themselves standing in the Wheeler's backyard. It clean sky bathed them with the light of a waxing moon and the million stars that surrounded it, all that light being captured and reflected by the white snow, which painted the whole place with a silver glow. She smiled at the sight, and he found her smile more beautiful than any spectacle nature could offer to him.

"El?" He called her, deciding that he would go straight to the point this time.

No more chickening out, no more dodging the subject. No more hiding his feelings.

She turned her head to look at him. He allowed himself one last moment to appreciate her in all her beauty before he cleared his throat.

"This is your first Christmas," he told her, and as he did so he took a step closer to her, his hand quickly finding it's way down her forearm to interlace his fingers with hers, "and I really, really want to make sure that this is the best one you can possibly get."

"I'm having fun," she told him, looking for a second at their fingers before looking back up at his eyes.

"I'm happy to hear that. But seriously, I really want this to be perfect for you. Remember what I told you about presents?" She just nodded, blinking two times and breathing in as she realized where this was going. "I said you always get and open them on the morning after Christmas Eve. But... Well, I have an early present for you."

He took his free hand inside his pocket and took out a small box wrapped up in green and red paper with a red ribbon on top.

"Merry early Christmas, El."

Her mouth was open in a cute 'o' shape, and her eyes were glowing with excitement. She slowly untangled their fingers and raised both hands to grab the small box. She held it on both her palms and just stared at it, like she was holding a fragile little creature that could be broken if you didn't hold it carefully enough. He was waiting for her to open it, he wanted to see her reaction and to continue with what he had planned, but he realized she wasn't making any move to open it.

"El?" He asked.

And then she sniffed. A few seconds later he witnessed her eyes watering and her lips trembling.

"Are you okay?" He said, resting a hand on her arm, ready to hug her. She furiously nodded and blinked a couple of times to keep a tear from falling down her cheeks. "What is it? You can tell me."

She wiped her eyes with the back of her right hand and began to speak, her eyes still focused on the little box.

"Dad buys me things," she said, trying her best to keep her composure, and he was a little surprised to hear her referring to Hopper as her dad. "Food. Clothes. Games. But... This..."

She sniffed again, and Mike just couldn't take it anymore. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled her into a hug. She surrendered to his embrace and wrapped her arms tightly around him. He stroked her back and allowed her a few seconds to pull herself together. When she was ready, she drew back enough to look at his eyes.

"Dad buys me things," she repeated, "but I never... got a..."

He could see her struggling to find the words, and he raised a hand to stroke her left cheek. She immediately stopped worrying about it and relaxed at his touch. He didn't need her to finish anyway.

"You mean this is the first time you get a proper present? A wrapped up gift?"

She nodded and threw himself back into his arms, burrowing her face into his chest. He embraced her once again with a proud smile on his face. Knowing that he had just given Eleven her first present ever was enough to make his whole plan worth the effort and thoughts. But that effort he had put into it was what made him want her to open it.

"Why don't you open it and see what's inside?"

She didn't need much encouragement. She took a step back and stared at the gift. Suddenly the ribbon and the paper started to move seemingly on their own, unwrapping themselves perfectly from the present. Mike chuckled at the sight and grabbed the handkerchief he was saving in his back pocket just for her. Once she was finished unwrapping the present she was faced with a tiny little blue box. He could see her biting her lower lip, and he knew that the suspense was killing her. He decided to play her a little more, and just as she was going to use her hand to open the little box he raised the hanky and wiped the tiny droplet of blood coming from her nose. She smiled at his attention, but as soon as he was done she finally opened the box.

She stared at what was inside and instinctively moved a hand to cover her mouth, furrowing her brows and blinking quickly as the tears threatened to leave her eyes one more time. He heard her sniff a couple of times before her hand left her mouth and made its trembling way to grab what was shining under the moonlight. Her fingers delicately raised the tiny silver chain, until the one word was hanging right in front of her eyes. A word she would never forget. How could she? It was one of the first words Mike had taught her, and one that she had found the most useful. It was, actually, one of her favorite words, if she was allowed to have favorite words in the first place.

Promise.

Mike felt his cheeks would soon rip apart due to the stretching his giant smile was forcing them to go through. The last thing he wanted in the world was to see Eleven crying, or about to. But all things considered, if she was one step away from crying from happiness for something he did for her... well, maybe he could live with that.

"What do you think?" He asked.

She couldn't even look at his eyes. All she could see was the shining, metallic word in front of her.

"Beautiful," she said, and the first tear of the night abandoned her eye, slithering its way down her cheek. She then looked at him. "T-Thank you. Mike. Thank you."

"You're welcome," he said, brushing her tear away with his thumb, "but... to be honest, this isn't the real present. It's just a reminder."

She blinked twice and tilted her head to the left.

"A re... reminder?"

"Something you can wear so you remember my real present," he explained with a smile, maliciously enjoying every second of her confusion.

"How... How could I forget a present from you?" She asked, either not realizing how much those words meant to him or simply not caring about it. He almost felt like he was gonna get teary himself.

"It's just that my real present isn't something you can put on a shelf or anything," he said, taking a big breath before pointing with a finger at the necklace. "It's a promise."

Her eyes sparkled.

"A promise?"

"Yeah. See, El, I just... There's something I need to tell you, okay? I've been meaning to tell you ever since that night you came back, but I always... I was... I was scared," he admitted. He was seriously starting to get all worked up over this, but at the same time, he realized that it was easier to tell her all that he felt than he had expected. It was like her sol presence made him be absolutely honest. "I was scared that you wouldn't be ready, that you wouldn't understand, or that one of us might get hurt."

"I won't let you get hurt," she quickly assured him, squeezing one of his hands. He laughed.

"I don't mean... Just forget it. What I'm trying to say, El, is that... I love you."

The bomb had been dropped, and the impact was as powerful as every textbook said Hiroshima's had been. He could feel the impact of his words. Not only for himself, feeling all his muscles tensing, his heart pounding at twice the usual speed and his legs shaking out of control. He could also feel how those three words had affected Eleven. She was frozen in time, her mouth and eyes wide open. There was no way he could know, but he was pretty sure that her heart had skipped a beat, just like his had forgotten how it was supposed to work.

The whole atmosphere felt changed after he said those words. He couldn't explain it, but it was like the air became thicker around them, the cold breeze had stopped and it was suddenly much warmer and comfy. He couldn't help but wonder if maybe Eleven's powers were much more impressive than he imagined.

Finally, she moved, and so he knew that he hadn't accidentally frozen her. She blinked once, twice, and then she just kept going, trying to delay the heavy salty drops to fall. Her lips were trembling again, this time contorted into a smile as she just stared at his face.

"M-Mike..."

"I really, really love you," he continued, deciding to go for the overkill. "I think I fell in love with you the moment we were left alone in my basement. You were so scared and in need, and I... I remember all I wanted to do was to hug you and made sure that nothing bad ever happened to you. It took me a while to realize that I loved you, but now I can see it. I've always felt this way, and I can't keep it to myself any longer."

Her shoulders started to convulse and she broke into a silent crying. He raised both his hands to cup her cheeks, using his fingers to brush away her falling tears, trying to wipe the salty trail they left on her beautiful face. One of her hands quickly rested over one of his, and the other one, the one holding the necklace, was soon pressed against her chest. She had to close her eyes for a second to catch her breath, but she couldn't stay long without seeing his eyes.

"I didn't tell you before because... I was afraid you wouldn't feel the same. Or that--"

"I l-love you too," she blurted, her hand squeezing his.

And his eyes were itching too. He assumed she did. He practically knew it, but not even expecting it had prepared him to hear the actual words escaping her mouth. The butterflies in his stomach were now more like furious bats, trying to find their way out of his body.

"Jesus, that... That makes me really happy! But I was also... I was afraid that if you do love me, you might not really understand what it means. But I... I... I just can't take it anymore. I needed to tell you. I want to do all I can to make sure that you understand what this means, but also I don't want to cause you any trouble. So my Christmas present for you is a promise."

He breathed in and tried to focus. He had practiced this speech countless times ever since last night, after his talk with Nancy. He knew the words by heart.

"El, I promise you from the bottom of my heart that I love you. That you're the most important person in the world to me. And that if you say 'yes' I'll do my best to make you happy, I won't let anything ever happen to you. And I also promise you that if you ever feel like you... don't... love me anymore, I'll accept it. We can still be friends, I won't love you any less."

Her crying resumed, this time stronger, and he could only wait for her to catch her breath.

"W-What...? What do you mean... I say 'yes'?" She asked. He almost slapped himself. Even with all the practice, he had forgotten about the literally most important part of his speech.

"Oh, yeah. El... would you be my girlfriend?"

He wondered whether he needed to explain what that word meant, but her radiant smile and exultant eyes were all he needed for an answer.

"Yes," she told him, managing to hold back the tears just so she could

soak in all his features as they stared into each other's eyes.

Mike Wheeler finally let out a sigh of relief, suddenly realizing that he had been holding his breath for the longest time. It was like a giant weight had been taken off his shoulders. He felt lighter, he felt more powerful. He was pretty sure that if he yelled "Shazam!" a lightning would fall from the sky onto him and he would turn into Earth's Mightiest Mortal, because he definitely felt like it. His knee finally stopped bouncing on its place, and he cracked a smile that he couldn't contain. He even pretended to ignore the little wet trail on his cheek. Just like her, all he wanted to do was to lose himself in her eyes. He wondered how it was possible for someone to be so beautiful, and he also wondered if it was okay for a human being to have their happiest moment of all time at age thirteen.

Suddenly Eleven closed her eyes and lowered her chin, and he was slightly disappointed because he was about to lean in for a kiss, but her focused expression managed to confuse him long enough for him to forget about her deception. When she looked up back at him he noticed one of her nostrils looked a bit redder than the other.

"What did you do?" He asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Up," she simply said.

Both of them looked up at the same time, and Mike started to laugh. A few inches above them, a little mistletoe was floating in the middle of the air.

"Why did you do that?" He asked, looking bemused by her little stunt.

"I need an excuse."

One of his hands caressed her cheek as the other one slithered its way down her face, neck, shoulder, and arm, finally resting on her hip.

"You don't need one," he said with his softest, most caring tone. "Not with me."

And with that, he leaned in, sealing his promise with a kiss under the moonlight. Eleven's hands, still clutching the necklace like she was afraid someone would try to take it away from her, found their way

around his neck as she reciprocated the kiss. This was like neither of their previous two kisses. The first time she was startled, and she didn't know how to react. The second time she had been totally into it, but it had been brief and cute. This time, both of them were trying to tell the other person just how much they meant to them. It was a kiss filled with passion, love, and most importantly, a promise. A promise that it wouldn't be the last. A promise that this was just the beginning of a new story. A promise that they would never be separated ever again.

That kiss was followed by a second one, and as the third one began, Eleven could only think that Christmas was, without a doubt, the best holiday ever.